Tailoring Feedback on Error in Language Learning

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Feedback on error, i.e., alerting students to the fact that something they have produced in writing or out loud is not being understood or is not quite target-like, is a vital component of successful second language learning.

Students often have a perception that receiving explicit correction on all of their errors, or on errors as soon as they are produced is beneficial to them. At the same time, language students may notice that many aspects of languages are subject to imperfection for a very long period of time: for example, learners may struggle into very advanced levels of Spanish to produce the correct gender agreement on many nouns. What is fascinating is that often learners can produce the wrong gender out loud, then immediately correct themselves: this is an indication that the learner has explicit knowledge of this rule but does not yet have implicit control of the rule. Explicit error correction on my part won't fix that a learner knows this gender implicitly: when learners know a concept explicitly (i.e., the gender of the noun), it can simply take time and exposure to produce that same concept in real-time interaction spontaneously, i.e., to produce that gender with implicit control.

Through research and practice, I have honed my approach to error feedback to account for these learning patterns and communicate them to students. There are many ways to correct students' output that can facilitate that learners uptake that feedback and produce the language in the target variety they are aiming to learn.

In my classroom and in asynchronous interactions, I purposefully use three techniques:
- *correcting* students overtly (error correction)
- *restating correctly* something a student has said with an error without explicitly drawing their attention to the error (recasts), and
- *alerting the student* that they have made an error but ask them to figure out the correction themselves (error feedback).

These techniques in different ways have been well-studied and cited for their efficacy in research on second language acquisition.

I use different proportions of these feedback types in asynchronous and synchronous learning. In synchronous **oral** interactions (whether that be teaching face-to-face or in my one-on-one conversations or small group synchronous conversations with students in asynchronous classes), I focus on trying to identify errors that are **salient, common, and learnable** at this stage of learning. Recasts are most common in my oral interactions, followed by error feedback, then error correction.

However, for feedback on **writing**, I stick mostly to error feedback at the more intermediate to advanced levels, and occasionally error correction for beginning learners. For a bit of

background on error correction in second language writing, a common technique historically in second language teaching has been to use a list of codes for grammatical or other errors. That list of codes is shared with the students. When the instructor grades a draft of a written composition, they use the codes to give students explicit feedback on their writing, then the student is expected to correct the error given the error code on the second (final) draft. For example, there are two words –*ser* and *estar* –for *to be* in Spanish, and students often confuse the two. One error code might be "S/E", defined in the list as "error in ser/estar". For example, if a student wrote *ser* where they needed *estar,* then the instructor could mark it as "S/E".

While there could be groups for which this approach works, there are several flaws in this approach. First, this practice presumes that students understand the codes and that the instructors remember and consciously and consistently use the codes. Second, many times a given word or phrase has multiple issues that would really necessitate multiple codes. **There is also an important problem of equity in this approach as well: this approach assumes learners have metalinguistic knowledge that many students do not have.** For example, many students do not know or remember what an adverb is, or what it means to say that they need a verb in their sentence. This issue may be compounded for native or heritage speakers who have fluency in the language, but may have very little explicit (metalinguistic) knowledge of Spanish and thus may not share or understand references to grammar concepts that are typical in second language Spanish classes.

The approach I use now for writing feedback on a written composition that has two drafts is to simply highlight in yellow any words or phrases that need to be fixed in some way (c.f., Chandler, 2003). Students can choose from a list of resources I provide to figure out how to change these words or phrases (e.g., their textbook, wordreference.com, short meeting with me, etc.). When I grade the corrected writing, I am sure to indicate what I intended their correction to be, but often students arrive at different solutions. **Even if their solutions are still not target-like (i.e., they could be grammatically incorrect), the process of trying new constructions is evidence to me that they are learning**, and I don't penalize students for those instances of non-target-like language on the final draft as long as they tried to change the language.

In terms of prioritizing what to give feedback on, I don't think it's useful to give students too many corrections on short asynchronous writing (such as discussion board posts). For example, in a student's discussion board post of approximately 50-70 words, I may correct use of the subjunctive (which involves a subtle vowel change, such as *cuiden* instead of *cuidan*) since this is a learning target of this block of study, a very salient lexical gender error on a frequent word (such *futura* instead of *futuro* for *future*), as well as one to two minor agreement errors the student should have explicit knowledge on at this level.

Overall, in language learning, tailored and purposeful feedback on error is essential for learners to reflect on their developing linguistic system in order to continue on the path to becoming more comprehensible in the language. I talk with students explicitly throughout the semester about errors and how I handle them: being open that learners should expect to make lots of

errors helps them feel supported and empowered that they can take chances and make mistakes without fear of their grade (or their self-confidence!) being affected.